

PERSONS REPRESENTED:

OEDIPUS  
A PRIEST  
CREON  
TEIRESIAS  
IOCASTE  
MESSENGER  
SHEPHERD OF LAIOS  
SECOND MESSENGER  
CHORUS OF THEBAN ELDERS

THE SCENE. Before the palace of Oedipus, King of Thebes. A central door and two lateral doors open onto a platform which runs the length of the façade. On the platform, right and left, are altars; and three steps lead down into the "orchestra," or chorus-ground. At the beginning of the action these steps are crowded by suppliants who have brought branches and chaplets of olive leaves and who lie in various attitudes of despair. OEDIPUS enters.

§ PROLOGUE

OEDIPUS:

My children, generations of the living  
In the line of Kadmos, nursed at his ancient hearth:  
Why have you strewn yourselves before these altars  
In supplication, with your boughs and garlands?  
The breath of incense rises from the city;  
With a sound of prayer and lamentation.

§ Oedipus Rex

AN ENGLISH VERSION  
BY DUDLEY FITTS AND ROBERT FITZGERALD

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## 4 OEDIPUS REX

Children,  
I would not have you speak through messengers,  
And therefore I have come myself to hear you—  
I, Oedipus, who bear the famous name.

[To a priest:]

You, there, since you are eldest in the company,  
Speak for them all, tell me what preys upon you,  
Whether you come in dread, or crave some blessing:  
Tell me, and never doubt that I will help you  
In every way I can; I should be heartless  
Were I not moved to find you suppliant here.

PRIEST:

Great Oedipus, O powerful King of Thebes  
You see how all the ages of our people  
Cling to your altar steps: here are boys  
Who can barely stand alone, and here are priests  
By weight of age, as I am a priest of God,  
And young men chosen from those yet unmarried;  
As for the others, all that multitude,  
They wait with olive chaplets in the squares,  
At the two shrines of Pallas, and where Apollo  
Speaks in the glowing embers.

Your own eyes

Must tell you: Thebes is tossed on a murdering sea  
And can not lift her head from the death surge.  
A rust consumes the buds and fruits of the earth;  
The herds are sick; children die unborn,  
And labor is vain. The god of plague and pyre  
Raids like detestable lightning through the city,  
And all the house of Kadmos is laid waste,  
All emptied, and all darkened: Death alone  
Battens upon the misery of Thebes.

You are not one of the immortal gods, we know;  
Yet we have come to you to make our prayer  
As to the man surest in mortal ways

And wisest in the ways of God. You saved us  
From the Sphinx, that flinty singer, and the tribute  
We paid to her so long; yet you were never  
Better informed than we, nor could we teach you:  
It was some god breathed in you to set us free.

Therefore, O mighty King, we turn to you:  
Find us our safety, find us a remedy,  
Whether by counsel of the gods or men.  
A king of wisdom tested in the past  
Can act in a time of troubles, and act well.  
Noblest of men, restore  
Life to your city! Think how all men call you  
Liberator for your triumph long ago;  
Ah, when your years of kingship are remembered,  
Let them not say *We rose, but later fell*—  
Keep the State from going down in the storm!  
Once, years ago, with happy augury,  
You brought us fortune; be the same again!  
No man questions your power to rule the land:  
But rule over men, not over a dead city!  
Ships are only hulls, citadels are nothing,  
When no life moves in the empty passageways.

OEDIPUS:

Poor children! You may be sure I know  
All that you longed for in your coming here.  
I know that you are deathly sick; and yet,  
Sick as you are, not one is as sick as I.  
Each of you suffers in himself alone  
His anguish, not another's; but my spirit  
Groans for the city, for myself, for you.

I was not sleeping, you are not waking me.  
No, I have been in tears for a long while  
And in my restless thought walked many ways.  
In all my search, I found one helpful course,

And that I have taken: I have sent Creon,  
 Son of Menoikeus, brother of the Queen,  
 To Delphi, Apollo's place of revelation,  
 To learn there, if he can,  
 What act or pledge of mine may save the city.  
 I have counted the days, and now, this very day,  
 I am troubled, for he has overstayed his time.  
 What is he doing? He has been gone too long.  
 Yet whenever he comes back, I should do ill  
 To scant whatever duty God reveals.

PRIEST:

It is a timely promise. At this instant  
 They tell me Creon is here.

OEDIPUS:

O Lord Apollo!  
 May his news be fair as his face is radiant!

PRIEST:

It could not be otherwise: he is crowned with bay,  
 The chaplet is thick with berries.

OEDIPUS:

We shall soon know;  
 He is near enough to hear us now.

[Enter CREON  
 O Prince:

Brother: son of Menoikeus:  
 What answer do you bring us from the gods?

CREON:

A strong one. I can tell you, great afflictions  
 Will turn out well, if they are taken well.

OEDIPUS:

What was the oracle? These vague words  
 Leave me still hanging between hope and fear.

CREON:

Is it your pleasure to hear me with all these  
 Gathered around us? I am prepared to speak,  
 But should we not go in?

OEDIPUS:

Let them all hear it.  
 It is for them I suffer, more than for myself.

CREON:

Then I will tell you what I heard at Delphi.

In plain words

The god commands us to expel from the land of  
 Thebes

An old defilement we are sheltering.

It is a deadly thing, beyond cure;

We must not let it feed upon us longer.

OEDIPUS:

What defilement? How shall we rid ourselves of it?

CREON:

By exile or death, blood for blood. It was

Murder that brought the plague-wind on the city.

OEDIPUS:

Murder of whom? Surely the god has named him?

CREON:

My lord: long ago Laios was our king,

Before you came to govern us.

OEDIPUS:

I know,  
 I learned of him from others; I never saw him.

